

October 19, 1994

Contact: Adele Z. Silver

FROM HAND TO MOUTH: A HISTORY OF FLATWARE
October 18, 1994 - February 19, 1995

An exhibition of more than fifty spoons, knives, and forks is an intriguing footnote to a major exhibition of silver vessels to open in late November at The Cleveland Museum of Art. **From Hand to Mouth: A History of Flatware** traces the development of table utensils and, with them, of table manners from 4th-century Byzantium to late 19th-century Victorian England. Ann Boger, Acting Assistant Curator of the Extensions Collection and organizer of the exhibition, begins that history: "Closed fingers or cupped hands served as spoons; knives were used for spearing individual chunks of meat out of the common bowl. Fingers and teeth did the rest."

The earliest spoons--probably modeled on shells or gourds--were made in three shapes: a small round or oval bowl, for eggs, snails, and shellfish; a larger pointed bowl, for soup, porridge, and other soft foods, whose direct descendant is the modern tablespoon; and a fig-shaped bowl, which became the most favored type until the 17th century.

The knife was not made specifically for table use until the 16th century. Before that, diners used their own daggers--routinely carried for protection and other useful purposes--as spears, cutters, and "forks." An early 16th-century table knife from the Netherlands with a gilt bronze handle has a pointed steel blade that would have done its job nicely. (Table knives with curved "scimitar" blades were used as food scoops in England and the United States; until the second or third decade of the 19th century the knife was the main American eating utensil, presumably making it possible--and acceptable--to eat peas with a knife.)

The fork is a comparatively recent addition to the European or American table. In fairly common use among the wealthy of Byzantium--a good early example is a rare

4th-century silver fork with a cloven hoof terminal--the fork was introduced into Europe by the Byzantine wife of a Venetian Doge in the 11th century. Europe's aristocrats found it a "ridiculous" new utensil, and generally adopted it only in the 16th century. The French improved the fork by making it with four slightly curved tines which could shovel as well as spear food.

Fashion quickly overtook these useful utensils. When forks were adopted in Europe, it became customary for dinner guests to bring their own--usually a luxurious matched pair, like the knife and fork set made of rock crystal, gold, enamel, and steel from the 17th-century Netherlands.

In the United States, so-called "Puritan" spoons were modeled after spoons with wide, straight-sided handles made in France and England in the first half of the 17th century. A fine example of the American style (1661) was made by John Hull (1624-1683) and Richard Sanderson (1609-1693), key figures in early American silver production, who trained the finest silversmiths of the next generation.

Silver has been the preferred material for spoons and forks for so long that "fine flatware" and "silver" have become virtually synonymous. Silver is durable and luminous, with a sensuous feel. It has a high heat conductivity and can instantly adjust to temperature, making it equally friendly to hand and mouth, but doesn't contain or give off substances that stain or affect the taste of food. And its metallurgical properties permit silver to be cast, beaten, drawn, stamped, incised, and oxidized, allowing for varied ornament and finish.

Specialty silver utensils became enormously popular during Victorian times. Spoons for sugar, salt, tea, coffee, chocolate, berries, soup, and punch were staples in a well-ordered, prosperous household. Broad-bladed silver knives were created for cakes, pastries, even fish. Samuel Kirk (1793-1872), the American silversmith famous for his idiosyncratic designs, crafted a witty stylized dolphin for the blade of a silver fish slice.

The major exhibition which **From Hand to Mouth** complements is **All That Glitters: Great Silver Vessels in Cleveland's Collection**. That exhibition, drawn from nearly every collection of the Museum, will open on November 23, 1994, and run through January 8, 1995. Its delightful companion show will be on exhibition in Gallery 102 until February 19, 1995. Ann Boger will talk in that gallery at 1:30 pm on Wednesday, January 18, and Sunday, January 22.

For additional information and photographs, please contact Adele Z. Silver, Public Information, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland OH 44106-1797; 216/421-7340.